Tampa Bay Times

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State sacks test-sites doctor

Eric Pantaleon was hired to give COVID results. Floridians complained of delays. His record had red flags.

BY REBECCA WOOLINGTON AND ALLISON ROSS
Times Staff Writers

The state abruptly cut ties last week with a doctor who had been involved in several coronavirus testing sites after the *Tampa Bay Times* posed questions about the physician's past.

South Florida physician Eric Pantaleon had been subcontracted to communicate positive test results to people who were tested for COVID-19 at more than a dozen government-run sites.

Public records show that in 2010, Pantaleon was permanently barred from treating patients who are HIV positive unless supervised by a specialist. That same year, he became a director at a clinic that federal prosecutors later said was part of Florida's illegal oxycodone trade. A search of his physician's license shows he's been terminated from the state's Medicaid program.

"Thank you for bringing this to our attention," Division of Emergency Management spokesman Jason Mahon wrote in a Friday statement to the *Times*.

Mahon then said the department "halted all use of Dr. Eric Pantaleon's medical practice effective immediately."

In a statement to the *Times*, Pantaleon defended his record. He said the improper HIV treatment plans could be blamed on the practice he worked for at the time. The federal investigation, Pantaleon said, never led to charges against him. He said his Medicaid contract was terminated 15 years ago without cause.

Pantaleon's removal as a coronavirus testing subcontractor was first reported Saturday by the *South Florida Sun Sentinel*, which described a stream of complaints about excessive wait times for test results at places where Pantaleon's practice, Medical Associates Network, had been listed as the contact.

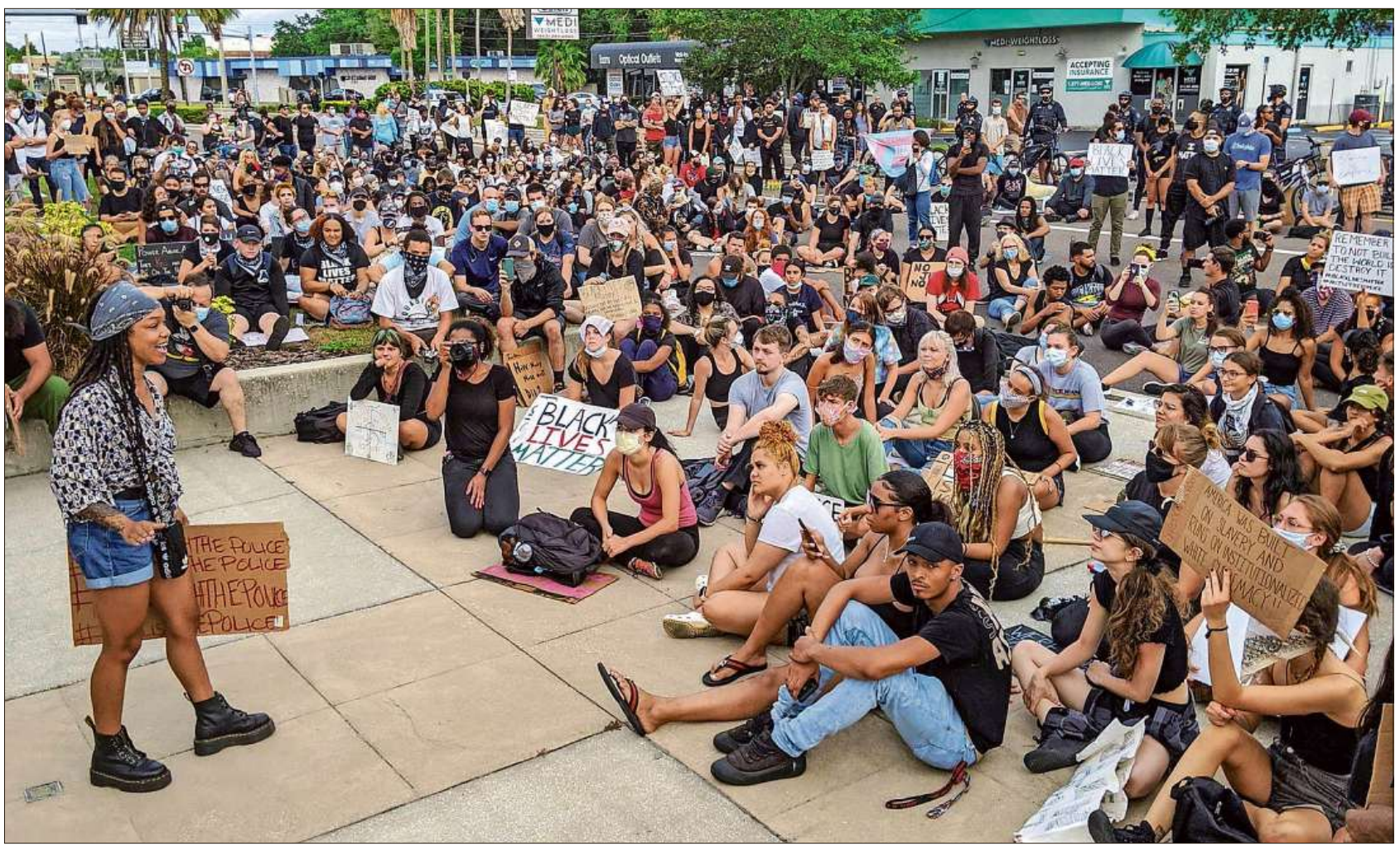
How Pantaleon was selected for the position is unclear.

But the strange case of how a South Florida doctor tied to an alleged pill mill became a central figure in coronavirus testing shows how easily things can go awry in the state's rush to expand its testing program.

Public health experts consider testing a key factor for a safe reopen-

See TESTING, 14A

Dr. Eric Pantaleon



Photos by DOUGLAS R. CLIFFORD | Times

VOICES OF PROTEST

Rebecca Lee, 22, speaks out against Tampa police officers while addressing a large gathering of protesters in front of the Fox 13 Tampa Bay news station in Tampa on Tuesday. At right, Tampa Mayor Jane Castor, center, speaks with protester Ariyan Lennett, 20, where a line of protesters gathered outside City Hall on E Kennedy Boulevard. In St. Petersburg, police charge four men with inciting a riot. **Stories, 15A**

Felon voting rights checked

Hillsborough "rocket docket" affirms vote for some, not others, over fines, finances.

BY DAN SULLIVAN
Times Staff Writer

TAMPA — It had been called a rocket docket, a "voting rights docket." But when it finally happened in a Tampa courtroom Tuesday afternoon, it may have been best described as a covered wagon docket.

The cases were those of 10 people, felons all, who wanted to exercise their right to vote. The only thing preventing it was the court costs they still owed, but claimed they were unable to pay.

The Hillsborough State Attorney and Public Defender's Offices had filed documents and financial affidavits on their behalf, asking a judge to relieve the 10 of their financial obligations and allow them to vote. But what may have been intended as a mass restoration of voting rights instead was a meticulous examination of each defendant's finances.

Hillsborough Circuit Judge Catherine Catlin refused to nix the debts of two people who still owed fines and whose financial papers indicated they could afford to pay them off. For another seven people — who owed court fees and costs, but not fines — the judge said they'd still owe the debt, but made an order saying there was no reason they couldn't register to vote. One man did not show up in court.

"It's not supposed to be a rubber stamp," State Attor-

See VOTE, 5A

Testing at care centers goes all in

Every resident and worker at 250 Pinellas sites is being checked.

BY MARK PUENTE AND KATHRYN VARN
Times Staff Writers

As older Floridians continue to die from the COVID-19 virus, the Florida Department of Health in Pinellas County is now testing all residents and employees in the county's 250 long-term care centers.

The testing is expected to be completed this week in nursing homes, assisted-living facilities and other long-term care centers, Pinellas County administrator Barry Burton told county commissioners on Tuesday.

To complete the testing, the Florida Department of Health sent test kits to half of the centers in the county, and tests will be performed on-site at the other locations, Burton said. The results from the tests have not yet been returned.

"Our nursing homes are still a concern," Burton told the *Tampa Bay Times*.

The Florida Department of Health in Pinellas County is working closely with the Florida National Guard strike teams to test all employees and resi-

See TESTING, 14A

State website's latest twist is … wait for it …

… and keep waiting. Jobless now placed in a virtual queue.

BY LAWRENCE MOWER
Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — Unemployed Floridians are now required to "wait in line" to use the state's unemployment website, further aggravating people who already were fed up with the system.

Rather than allowing people to automatically log in to the state site, called CONNECT, users now have to enter a virtual "waiting room" with wait times longer than an hour. Users' progress is indicated by a stick figure walking across the screen.

The new process prompted out-of-work Floridians to email reporters and take to Twitter in exasperation. CONNECT is routinely taken down on the weekends and at night, and some users said Monday they were kicked out even after waiting more than an hour to log in.

State officials rolled out the change to further ration how many people access the online site at the same time, said

See CONNECT, 14A

Correction

At least 71 people were arrested last weekend in connection with demonstrations and looting in Hillsborough County. A front page headline and story Tuesday had an incorrect number.

'A LOT' OF UNMARKED GRAVES AT CEMETERY

Archaeologists who used ground-penetrating radar say unmarked graves cover much of the open space at the all-black Memorial Park Cemetery in Tampa, which has 6,000 tombstones. **3A**

TRUMP VISIT TO POPE SHRINE DRAWS FIRE

Archbishop Wilton Gregory blasted the trip Tuesday to a site honoring Pope John Paul II and the forceful removal of protesters so the president could go to a church a day earlier. **30A**

LOCAL YOUTH SOCCER ONLY PARTIALLY BACK

Some bay area programs are moving ahead with coronavirus precautions in place. Others say they have doubts about whether it's safe enough to return and aren't ready to risk it. **Sports, 21A**

Tropical moisture

8 a.m.	Noon	4 p.m.	8 p.m.
77°	84°	81°	76°

70% chance of rain

More 23A

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